

EARLY MODERN MUSAR: ITS COHERENCE AND RELEVANCE

by HILLEL GOLDBERG

Prof. Ben Halpern has observed that when Ashkenazic Jewry, the major part of world Jewry that survived the Middle Ages and that remained most secluded from outside influences, emerged from its prolonged ghettoization, it “exploded into European society with unexampled dynamism.” It produced not only Marx, Freud and Einstein, writers, musicians and Nobel-prize-winning scientists, but also the “internal shocks and revolutions that constitute modern Jewish history, from religious reform to Jewish secularism, nationalist and socialist.”¹

In tracing the shocks and the revolutions of the nineteenth century, modern Jewish historiography has painstakingly charted ideological conflicts, but it has not ferreted out and analyzed the cross-cultural phenomena which refracted both sides of an ideological conflict through a reconciliatory lens. In Eastern Europe the ideological conflicts included the last stages of the struggle between Hasidism and Mitnagedut (Lithuanian “Oppositionism”), the subsequent alliance of Hassidism and and Mitnagedut against Enlightenment, and the clash between secular Zionism and religious anti-Zionism. Historiography records numerous shadings within the main ideologies, and it shows how the thought of partisans to

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1. “Modern Jews and Their History,” *Commentary* 56:2 (1973), p. 73.

one side of an ideological conflict was sometimes reflected in the intellectual frame of the other side, but more open and distinct processes of cross-fertilization, existing between and partaking of opposing major ideologies, remain largely unearthed. The volumes of Dubnow, Ettinger, Louis Greenberg² and other comprehensive and specialized works on modern Jewish history contain inadequate or no treatment of phenomena such as Musar, the movement for the cultivation of ethical action and self-knowledge founded by Rabbi Israel Salanter in 19th century Lithuania. In its own time, the Musar movement ultimately failed, but its aspiration to reconcile sharply divided ideologies — and its thought — remain instructive and enlightening in this, the post-Holocaust generation generally and the 1980s particularly. To ascertain early modern Musar's relevance, its coherency must first be set forth.

I

A product of Lithuanian Jewry, the Musar movement was an attempt to both engage and arrest the twofold, symbiotic process of emergence from ghettoization: Enlightenment and Emancipation. Haskalah (Enlightenment), originally an urge to adopt the values of and participate politically and economically in the host culture, preceded and paved the way for the acceptance of Emancipation, the actual reduction or removal of the political and economic barriers which insulated Jewish life. Emancipation, in turn, greatly accelerated the spread of Enlightenment, which then stimulated an impulse for comprehensive participation in gentile society, reaching beyond political and economic to social, intellectual and professional life. Indeed, in Western Europe, Jewish participation in the higher intellectual, economic and professional strata was often greatly disproportionate to the Jewish percentage of the population. In Eastern Europe, the pace of Enlightenment always outstripped the pace of Emancipation, which to this day remains incomplete. Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810–1883), founder of the Musar movement, enjoyed a measure of success in cushioning the impact of Haskalah in Lithuania precisely because he confronted it when it was still in its embryonic stages, before Emancipation had begun, and because, unlike other traditionalist leaders, he did not regard Haskalah as wholly malevolent.

Rabbi Israel was a most able Talmud scholar who, when only 30, was invited to head one of the leading academies in Vilna, the intellectual seat and “Jerusalem” of Lithuania. When he arrived in Vilna in 1840 or 1841, Lithuanian traditionalism was, to all appearances, flourishing, but Rabbi Israel perceived

2. S. Dubnow, *A History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 3 v. (Philadelphia, 1916–20); S. Ettinger, *Toldot Yisrael be'et ha-ḥadasha* [v, 3 of H. H. Ben-Sasson, ed., *Toldot Am Yisrael*, 3 v. (Tel-Aviv, 1969); English: *A History of the Jewish People: The Modern Period* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976); L. Greenberg, *The Jewish in Russia: The Struggle for Emancipation* (New York, 1976), 2v.

beneath the external religiosity a weakened core. He sensed Lithuanian Enlightenment's latent power; he attributed its potential to the supreme value it placed on the widening of intellectual horizons. Its nourishing the mind without cultivating the will could undermine traditional behavior norms, for traditional Lithuanian Jewry, like Lithuanian Enlightenment, stressed intellection. Traditional emphasis on study of sacred texts could easily be supplanted by commitment to secular study, and, through it, secular culture.

Rabbi Israel agreed with Haskalah that Orthodoxy's emphases within Jewish learning were narrow, and that its failure to emphasize the ethical tenets of Judaism as decisively as it emphasized the rituals was unfortunate. His own prescription was to rebuild from within, to engender a more vibrant and authentically traditional Jewish community. He neither challenged Haskalah directly, after the manner of subsequent East European Orthodox communal leadership, nor did he ignore it, as would the Volozhin Yeshiva and the rest of the educational establishment. More subtly, he hoped to prevent the emergence of Haskalah by judiciously appropriating those of its tendencies deemed compatible with tradition (for example, its humanistic stress on individual development and its pungent critique of the community's ethical laxity) and by strengthening Lithuanian Jewry's will to withstand those of Haskalah's tendencies deemed incompatible with tradition (for example, its derogation of Talmud study and its slow but sure abandonment of the traditional patterns of observance). Rabbi Israel's recognition of Haskalah's power and his tacit regard of some of its tenets as correct abetted the Musar movement in arresting the pace of Haskalah's growth more successfully than Lithuania's communal or educational bodies. Nonetheless, by the end of the century, Musar had failed to dominate Lithuanian Jewry; indeed, it represented a small minority.

To mount a successful challenge to Enlightenment, the Musar movement first had to revitalize its own traditionalist constituency. Its efforts in this direction were seriously blunted by charges that Musar — with its special conventicles for introspection, intimate talks (*muser shmuesn*), and structured encounter groups (*va'adim*) — was sectarian, and that Musar impugned the stature of venerated leaders of previous generations, who regarded true piety as attainable without special conventicles (*muser shtiblekh*). From the beginning, Musar's forces were drained by having to wage battle on two fronts, from within as well as without the Orthodox community.³ Moreover, the formidable, multi-faceted intellectual,

3. The most comprehensive treatment of opposition to the Musar movement remains Dov Katz, *Pulmus ha-Musar* (Jerusalem, 1972). For the history of the Musar movement, see D. Katz, *Tenu'at ha-Musar*, 5 v. (Tel-Aviv, 1958) and Emmanuel Etkas, *R. Yisrael Salanter ve-Reshitah shel Tenu'at ha-Musar* (Jerusalem, 1982).

psychological and ethical tasks that Musar sought to impose on potential adherents discouraged traditionalists who were in principle sympathetic to them.

The Musar movement's focus on the individual squared with Haskalah's early stress on individual growth, but Musar's beginnings paralleled an explicitly assimilatory phase of Eastern European Haskalah, the renunciation of the Jewish community and the craving for knowledge of Russian language and romantic literature. Not the individual *per se* but the secularized individual defined Haskalah's concern. When Judah Leib Gordon preached, "Be a Jew at home and a man in the street," it was the man in the street who constituted the prime focus of his concern. When Musar countered, "Be a Jew and a man everywhere," the message which Haskalah received was that since Musar's religious conception of the Jew was unacceptable, its universal man was equally unacceptable.

Musar's growth was restrained further by its attitude toward Emancipation. Haskalah responded positively to the material benefits made available by Czar Alexander II's opening of Russian universities to Jews and his allowing Jewish merchants to settle outside the Pale of Settlement. Musar opposed acceptance of these unprecedented Czarist concessions because it correctly perceived that their intent was to accelerate assimilation. With Alexander II's rescission of his liberalism in the 1870s, Haskalah entered a period of trenchant reassessment of its hitherto enthusiastic adoption of Russian culture, and thus prepared the growth for the Jewish nationalist revival in Eastern Europe. Earlier Musar strictures about the Czarist blandishments aroused only limited regret or return to religion on the part of advocates of Enlightenment (*maskilim*) because secularism had become an abiding force. Secularism would be rechanneled from assimilation to nationalism or socialism but rarely would it be uprooted. In terms of communal and political orientation, another cross-cultural phenomenon, religious Zionism, would address secular Jewish nationalism with its own interweavings of ancient and contemporary doctrines, but the Musar movement rarely veered from its focus on the individual.⁴

Rabbi Israel himself realized the impossibility of successfully grappling with pronounced assimilation. At the height of his influence in Lithuania, in 1857 or 1858, he abruptly abandoned his ancestral moorings for Germany. Elsewhere I have dealt with the web of reasons for his departure, some of which relate to the peculiarities of his saintliness.⁵ Here I limit myself to certain programmatic motivations of Rabbi Israel.

4. Perceptive, accurate summaries of both Haskalah and early religious Zionism (and anti-Zionism) are found, respectively, in David Vital, *The Origins of Zionism* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 40–48, 111–125, and *idem.*, *Zionism: The Formative Years* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 41–43, 69–70, 204–229.

5. H. Goldberg, "Toward an Understanding of Rabbi Israel Salanter," *Tradition* 16:1 (1976), pp. 96–100.

He compared Lithuanian Jewry, tradition-bound yet under severe attack, to horses in panic on a downhill slope, unable to be restrained without danger to life and limb. In Germany, however, the runaway horses were said to move along level ground; it might be possible to bridle the horses (the forces of Haskalah) and use them judiciously. Rabbi Israel struck out for territory where Haskalah was already taken for granted and perhaps could be creatively encountered. He did not want to still his imagination.

Rabbi Israel wandered through Western Europe, mostly Germany, for nearly a quarter of a century. He devoted time to individuals; he also discerned that individual effort was not the key to reaching sectors of an emergent modern culture into which the bulk of German Jewry was assimilating. He tried to use modern media even when it meant funnelling his own teachings through gentile institutions. He laid plans for introducing Talmud into German university curricula, for founding a journal of Musar thought and Talmudic investigation, for translating the Talmud from Aramaic into Hebrew and European languages, and for elucidating the methodological principles of Talmud study. All of these plans were either short-lived successes or outright failures. Not until decades later did others successfully initiate these projects and even today not all of them have been realized.

His own failure in Germany is linked to the fate of the attempt of emancipated, nineteenth-century West European Jewry to win acceptance in the majority culture. With a century of hindsight, we regard this attempt as abortive. The most heinous and comprehensive expression of anti-Semitism in all history sprouted from West European, nay, from the very Prussian soil that Rabbi Israel strode and during a decade in which he was active — the 1870s. Even without the burden of hindsight, looking at Western Europe as it was then and summoning the most optimistic liberal view of the tolerance of cultural pluralism in the West in general and Imperial Germany in particular, we must still concede that Rabbi Israel faced insurmountable obstacles in his intercourse with the West.⁶ He was the first East European Jew of his stature to attempt a significant relationship with Western culture; he began work at nearly 50 in a language not his mother tongue; he was untrained in critical methods of scholarship; he met with insufficient cooperation or outright opposition from Lithuanian rabbinical scholars, on whom the success of some of his projects depended. These, of course, were only technical obstacles. Of greater moment in the German context was the impossibility of the substance of his program.

6. A vivid portrait of the constraints which Imperial Germany imposed on even a wealthy, powerful and fully assimilated Jew is found in Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder and the Building of the German Empire* (New York, 1979), Ch. 18, pp. 494–531.

For German Jewry Rabbi Israel did not seek conversion; he did not seek acceptance alongside retention of nominal Jewishness; nor did he seek to demonstrate the congruence of Judaism with prevailing intellectual currents. He differed from those Jewish intellectuals in the West (mostly in Germany), the first practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, who, in their appropriation of the scientific, philological and historical methods of the University, explored Jewish history and literatures with the aim of identifying and conceptually eradicating Judaism's excrescences and thereby revealing it as a worthy candidate for acceptance in Western culture.⁷ Rabbi Israel did not apologize for the past. His aim was to emphasize where Judaism differed and what it had to contribute — normative behavior and thought — while ceding its debt to Enlightenment for refocusing the eyes of tradition on neglected ethical and humanistic desiderata in its doctrinal corpus. This Jewishly assertive if non-chauvinistic approach was incapable of penetrating the late nineteenth-century Western cast of mind, notwithstanding Rabbi Israel's limited, didactic purpose of reaching assimilated Jews through regnant cultural and intellectual conduits. As stubbornly traditional as he was open and subtle, Rabbi Israel preferred the failure of not compromising his conception of Judaism to the possible success of propagation Judaism on terms not his own. Symbolic of both his success and his failure, he died in 1883 in Koenigsberg, Prussia, with neither family nor students present, alone with a paid servant of the Jewish community, who later related how the experimentine saint had spent his last hours soothing his guardian, explaining that there was no reason to fear spending an evening with a corpse — his own.⁸

Though the Musar movement did not succeed in dominating either Lithuanian or German Jewry, it did continue to play a role in Lithuania and later in Russia and Poland, up to the Nazi onslaught. The movement altered, frequently narrowed, but rarely lost, Rabbi Israel's heritage of reaching beyond Orthodoxy to confront contemporary intellectual currents. Musar never extirpated the alertness and tension stemming from cross-cultural involvement. Musar (particularly its non-Novaredok schools; see below) fostered an intellectual climate hospitable to two types of marginal individuals in East European Jewry, each type destined to assume significant scholarly and rabbinical roles. These were individuals who accepted the axiology of Orthodoxy but, though born into it, recoiled from its lifestyle in whole or in part and justified their departure on psychological grounds,

7. Gershom Scholem, "The Science of Judaism — Then and Now," in his *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971); David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 4–25.

8. The story of Rabbi Israel's death is in Abraham J. Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's* (New York, 1966), p. 21. On the Musar movement's attitude toward death, and on Rabbi Israel's death as the paradigm of that attitude, see H. Goldberg, "To Learn to Die, To Learn to Live," *Forum* 46–47 (1982), pp. 91–96.

or who, due to family background, stood wholly or partially outside Orthodoxy and wanted to work their way into it without having to accept in short order its behavior patterns or philosophic foundations. Musar, in short, was a particular way into and out of Orthodoxy.

Two major post-Salanterian conduits of Musar were its Novaredok and Slobodka schools. The Novaredok school utterly negated the value of Russian and, later, Polish culture, but outright negation no less than discriminating acceptance implies active relation. Novaredok reached a peak of influence during the Russian Revolution. It opposed total materialism with total spirituality and thus generated either fierce adherence to piety or utter rejection of it.⁹

The Slobodka school, founded and led for fifty years by the “Elder of Slobodka,” Rabbi Nathan Zvi Finkel, stood midway between Novaredok and Rabbi Israel’s program. Slobodka’s adherents assumed the manner and dress of European aristocrats, and valued intense intellection: penetrating Talmud study and reliance on the mind to reshape the inner personality. Slobodka’s distinct, if superficial, connection to European culture, combined with its high regard for the mind, generated an atmosphere of cross-cultural intellectual tension that produced a protean intellectual elite. Slobodka was a veritable wellspring of brilliance, exemplifying an aphorism of its founder, “If I knew that I could be only what I am, I could not endure it; but if I did not strive to be equal to the Gaon of Vilna, then I would not be even what I am.” Slobodka trained a

9. It is this black-and-white modality which is misinterpreted in two much acclaimed Yiddish novels by Chaim Grade, *Tsemakh Atlas* and *Milkhemes ha-Yaytsr*, published in English translation as *The Yeshiva*, 2 v. (Indianapolis, New York, 1976–77). The novels are akin to Martin Buber’s work on Hasidism: of much literary merit, but inaccurate. Grade’s only direct contact with Novaredok schools was for some months as a young man, with a few sporadic encounters thereafter. It is not only that his personal contact was sparse. His works show no evidence that he read any of the thick doctrinal tracts written by Novaredok’s founder and students. Grade’s misinterpretation of Novaredok requires a detailed analysis. Here, let two points suffice.

First, the stark choice which Novaredok offered was between non-piety and an extreme *but joyous* piety. Grade, however, portrays Novaredok adherents as given not to a joyous but to a morbid and oppressive piety. And this, as far as I can tell from interviews with tens of World War II survivors who learned in Novaredok and then (still before the war) either rejected it or remained committed to it, is for the most part a figment of Grade’s imagination. It is not that Novaredok did not sometimes catalyze intense rejection of piety. It did, but the rejection — again, based on much oral testimony — was unequivocal. This, then, is the second point: Whereas Grade portrays ex-adherents of Novaredok essentially as troubled souls who oscillated between piety and non-piety while manifesting guilt, regret and yearning, the students of Novaredok (1915–1939) whom I have encountered either adhered to Novaredok doctrine steadfastly or rejected it wholly and without guilt, while regarding it as unwise, or dangerous, or ludicrous, or as describing a worthy lifestyle in which they were personally uninterested or of which they were incapable — but very rarely as a phenomenon which continued to make claims on their conscience.

significantly disproportionate share of the most outstanding yeshiva deans of the twentieth century. It also produced a host of diverse, extraordinary thinkers who, sensitive to Slobodka's cross-cultural intellectual tension, marked out unique paths in attempting to resolve it. Two examples are the late eminent historian of philosophy, Harry A. Wolfson, and the late renowned halakhist and Rector of the Hildesheimer Seminary in Berlin, Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg.¹⁰

Both Slobodka and Novaredok also produced men who did not attain the public recognition of yeshiva deans or figures like Wolfson and Weinberg — whose achievement was their ability to shield from public gaze their having become luminous embodiments of piety. These men complemented genuine Talmudic scholarship with a purity and anonymity of service that did not partake of the wider intellectual horizons of Rabbi Israel's program.¹¹

Slobodka and Novaredok and the other Musar schools, along with so much else, were virtually decimated in the ghettos and camps and chambers of Nazism.

II

Musar ultimately failed, but why? Its unwillingness to cut itself off from the new secular culture, but, at the same time, its staunch adherence to tradition, could not survive either the traditional or the secular momentum, zealously bent on nurturing yet sheltering either the old or the new truth, but not both. Now, it is just such an interweaving of old and new which can, and in fact *is*, leading the way forward out of the debilitating paralyses, silences and anguished denials of

10. Of course, other academies, such as the celebrated one in Volozhin, spawned first-rate thinkers, but Volozhin's Western-oriented graduates broke with it explicitly and did so not on account of anything endemic to it but under the impact of forces which impinged from the outside. Accordingly, the stance which these intellectuals subsequently took toward the traditional academies presupposed an essential detachment, whether the stance was one of outright antagonism, nostalgia, or a willingness to consider the academies as a legitimate but limited segment of the Jewish intellectual spectrum. On the other hand, the Slobodka school, as a meeting ground, however inchoate, of two cultures, extracted on the deepest level a lifelong allegiance to its values and tensions among those who later veered from it philosophically in a major or minor way. Leon Wieseltier has noted Harry Wolfson's post-*Wissenschaft* Jewish affirmation, his belief in the flexibility and absorptive capacity of Jewish tradition, and his tendency to ideologize Judaism. Slobodka — unswervingly Jewish, cross-cultural, intellectual — forms the first link between the insular Lithuanian religiosity in which Wolfson was raised and the explicitly modern setting — Harvard — in which he grappled with contemporary concerns. And it was not just this grappling which can be traced to Slobodka. As I shall show elsewhere, Wolfson's "Talmudic hypothetico-deductive" method of text interpretation can be traced not merely to a so-called traditional method of Talmud study (as if there were but one such method) but to the method used in Slobodka.

11. For a memoir of one such figure, Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Lessin, see H. Goldberg, "From Berkeley to Jerusalem." *Midstream* 28:6 (1982), pp. 41–43.

the post-Holocaust era. In the open, unrestrained, pluralistic and ethnic cultural situation of the West in the 1980s, the Jewish community is witnessing a remarkably widespread growth of returnees to Orthodoxy; an unmistakable interest by assimilated Jewish students and academics in Israel, Hebrew, Judaic culture and scholarship and even tradition; and a renunciation of purely universal Marxism or socialism by Jewish leftists. Each of these types of turnings is not unprecedented in modern Jewish history, but the confluence of all of them at one time, and their pace and depth, is unprecedented. Musar, needless to say, in no way caused all this, but Musar was the first movement in modern Jewish history to grapple with the subtle and difficult task of doing full justice to the old world while operating within the different, partially destructive and partially liberating secular world. Exploration and contemplation of the history of Musar cannot provide a detailed programmatic handbook to the contemporary Jewish returnee, but it can be instructive; it can define generally the tensions, the stages and the exhilaration of turning back.

On the one hand, the contemporary returnee wants to *act*, to change his life personally, often professionally, and to rebuild the Jewish community. It was the blind drive to act which, in point of fact, was the major response of the Jewish people to the Holocaust: the establishment of a large, secure, corporate Jewish community in Palestine. Thirty-six years later, the urge to act is tempered by the urge to think and ponder; *why* ought one act? To what philosophy or theology ought one be committed? Ought one take philosophy or theology seriously at all? Here, too, Musar — particularly its thought, or intellectual foundations — are instructive. For the pervasive modality of Rabbi Israel's thought was the relationship between the primacy of right action, or ethics, and the place of philosophical conceptions of action, of man, and of God. We shall now turn to Rabbi Israel's understanding of the relationship between action and thought.

Notwithstanding numerous instances of substantive growth and change in Rabbi Israel's thought,¹² there is an underlying unity to it. It is an unswerving devotion, from the standpoint of both practice (in his Lithuanian period) and theory (in his German period), to ethics. Right action is the abiding theme which molds Rabbi Israel's entire corpus. At the same time, his emphasis on ethics moves within a

12. Rabbi Israel changes or develops his views on Divine attributes, causality, miracle, fear of God, free will, irrationality, the demonic, objectivity in the adjudication of *halakhah*, self-exploitation, the subjugation and transmutation of unconscious impulses, theodicy and Torah study. These developments are set forth in detail in my *Israel Salanter: Text, Structure, Idea* (New York, 1982) [see review in *Immanuel* 17 (1983), pp. 68–76, ed.], which also contains an analysis of the sources of the present summary of Rabbi Israel's thought as well as the summary itself in a lengthier form. The summary is indebted to Aharon Lichtenstein, *Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), for conceptual analysis.

subtle texture of other topics. He devotes considerable attention in his Vilna period (1843–1849) to free will, prophecy, theodicy, and Divine causality, miracle and omnipotence; in his Kovno period (1850–1858), to the medieval question of matter and form; in his early German period (1858–1870), to Divine providence and foreknowledge, to irrationality in dogma, in man and in methods of fostering ethics, and to the definition of revealed truth and, again, free will; and, in his late German period (1871–1883), to the medieval question of internal senses, and, again, theodicy and free will. As an ethicist Rabbi Israel could reach high and wide because, simply, ethics itself has never been rigorously defined and delimited in Jewish scholarly or traditional contexts. Take, for example, the very word *musar*. Commonly translated “ethics,” it has a wide variety of connotations both in the Hebrew Bible and in that medieval literature usually termed medieval *musar* literature. In the Bible it can connote instruction, discipline or punishment. It can describe neo-Platonic, Rabbinic, Kabbalistic or German-Hasidic medieval literature. By the same token, it can assume a unique meaning in Rabbi Israel’s early writings. Historically, ethics has served as a catch-all for that which has not fit strictly under Kabbalah or philosophy or history or literature or theology.

Ethics focuses on interpersonal relations, and this entails psychology¹³ and, particularly in a Jewish context, commandment (both central themes in all of Rabbi Israel’s periods), but it also may readily entail the study of ethical texts (literature), the context and meaning of interpersonal relations (theology, philosophy, Kabbalah), and the invocation of ethical models in Jewish history (history, literature). Ethics may also entail piety (the two, of course, are not synonymous). In Rabbi Israel’s writings we find him stretching the definition and the limits of ethics at every turn. His intermeshing of ethics with a panorama of disciplines does not make him a philosopher or a theologian or a kabbalist. Does it then make him an instructive ethicist?

We must address the question as to whether action, or ethics, constitutes not merely the immediate aim of Rabbi Israel’s thought but also its sum and substance. Was his an ethics which sought not merely to redress insufficient stress on worthy behavior but also to define the essence of Judaism? Was his ramified interest in philosophy and theology and other disciplines integral to this thought, or was it mere diffuse curiosity? At issue here is whether Rabbi Israel’s stress on ethics was tactical, a response to perceived distortions in traditional society, or whether it was philosophical, a representation of a total *weltanschauung*. At issue, in a word, is whether Salanterian *musar* evinced scope and depth.

13. H. Goldberg, “An Early Psychologist of the Unconscious,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43 (1982), pp. 269–284.

The issue is best considered by turning to Rabbi Israel's texts on effort, God, revelation, sin and Divine judgment.

Concerning effort: Is Rabbi Israel's ethics easily apprehended; is it anti-intellectual, intended for the unlettered? Is it mere conduct? Or is it apprehended and practiced only through extensive exploration of texts of traditional Judaism? Throughout his Vilna, Kovno, and early and late German-period writings — throughout his entire corpus, despite its shifting emphases — Rabbi Israel couples ethical refinement and arduous intellection. The one complements, not supplants, the other. Action and thinking are mutually enriching. Even the intellectually untalented is bidden to exercise maximally his slight intellectual capacities. It is not mere knowledge but the actual search for knowledge, the nurture of the human mind, which concerns Rabbi Israel. To him, action, ethics, is not the sum and substance of religion.

Concerning God: Is Rabbi Israel's ethics qualitatively of a piece with his concept of God, such that man-man relations at their best differ from man-God relations only in degree, not in kind? Or is his ethics qualitatively distinct from man's relation to God; that is, are man and God, to Rabbi Israel, not merely quantitatively but qualitatively distinct? In his Vilna period the goal of at least of his two major musar techniques is to draw man "near to God." This presupposes that, intrinsically, man is far from God, and that, ideally, he moves toward Him. Movement toward Him, especially when that movement is unable to culminate in mystical oneness with Him, presupposes a chasm between man and God. It presupposes a *weltanschauung* in which ethical conduct is part and parcel of a larger system ultimately discontinuous with a purely human frame of reference — a system to which matters such as theodicy, Divine omnipotence and foreknowledge, prophecy and providence are integral. Then also, in Rabbi Israel's Vilna and late German-period writings, when God is described as continuous with man, as able to be affected by man and in real need of him, Rabbi Israel carefully qualifies that notion by stating that though it is formulating in language calculated to be understandable to man, it is at bottom wholly beyond human understanding.

Concerning revelation: Is Rabbi Israel's ethics, even if said to be revealed, wholly discoverable by human reason; is his ethics a mere religion of reason, an essentially human, self-contained system? Or is his ethics of a supernatural order, Divine not only in truth and origin but also in character? The latter is Rabbi Israel's position. In the Vilna and the early German-period writings, one pivotal Divine commandment, humility, is said to be irrational. Now, this is bothersome to Rabbi Israel since he presumes that all Jews value reason and that, accordingly, they find this particular commandment inordinately difficult to observe. But his stress on the need to surmount inner recoil at observing an irrational

commandment confirms his fundamental position: all commandments partake of truths whose bounds are beyond human ken. The commandments, like God who revealed them, are *sui generis*, ultimately beyond human reason. Rabbi Israel would surely agree that we must elevate ourselves to notions as sublime as we can grasp, but “that when we have reached our limit, we must realize that, above and beyond, there remains a fuller and a clearer truth.”¹⁴ Furthermore, in Rabbi Israel’s early German period, it is not only the character of Divine commands but the nature of the being to whom they are addressed — man himself — by which the ultimate, “wholly other” quality of revealed commands is set forth.

Man is said to be unable ever to wholly comprehend even those commandments which, in principle, are accessible to human reason. For intellect can never wholly free itself of bias; man can never achieve utter self-transcendence. Even though he can wholly transmute his desires, he can never eradicate the psychological energy out of which those desires, whether untutored or transmuted, are derived. At best, he can, by transmuting his desires, attain “pure self,” irreducible and ineradicable. He can transmute psychological energy which, even when transmuted, still shapes intellectual perception. However exalted, man remains — man; hylic; *gashmi*. Man himself is the ultimate barrier between human intellect and unadulterated comprehension of revealed, absolutely objective — and even perfectly rational — truth. Thus man himself reveals the wholly other quality of revelation. At the same time, man’s pure self is the root of all-encompassing, internally and externally flawless ethical behavior. Ethics is but one side of a coin — pure self — whose other side is the unique, supernatural character of revealed truth.

And so, Rabbi Israel’s ramified interest in philosophy, theology and other fields was not coincidental to his thought, but central to it. His stress on ethics did not impart to ethics axiological exclusivity. What emerges from Rabbi Israel’s moralistic emphasis, in all of its various stages, is a world view in which the study of sacred texts revealed by God, the qualitative discontinuity between man and God, and the ultimate inaccessibility of the will of God, impart perspective and contextual meaning to ethics. Rabbi Israel’s accentuation of the inescapability of Divine reckoning and the mystery of human suffering also contribute to this.

But now an opposite question arises. Did Rabbi Israel — who, unlike a secular humanist or a simple religious moralist, did not detach ethics from God, or equate it with human reason, or free it of intellectual toil — did he ground ethics too much in God and set it beyond human reach? Did he preserve the majesty of and the finitude of man to such an extent that his desired ethical ambience could

14. Lichtenstein (*op. cit.*), p. 214.

become counterproductive, consonant with quietism and elemental cringing terror before God?

It is this aspect of Rabbi Israel's thought — his keen sensitivity to Divine wrath and to human sin and its malignant effects upon character and behavior — that is most readily perceived, and it is this which is most commonly mistaken to be the whole of his thought. And not without reason. Leafing through his first five letters (Vilna) and his Musar Letter (Kovno) — his most influential writings — one is continually struck by references to the contemplation of fear of God and to post-mortal Divine reckoning, to man's sickness and corruption and sin and torment and evil urge and lust and transgression. Yet, this is but one side of the picture. "Despair," writes Rabbi Israel, "*almost* prevails." He readily acknowledged evil, but was not morbid. For in his Vilna and Kovno periods the axis of his thought is practical ethics, and in his early and late German periods it is the theory behind practical ethics. Rabbi Israel did not dwell on human evil *per se*, but on how man could surmount evil. He did not dwell on the depths to which man could sink, but on the means by which man could arise from out of them. What is more, Rabbi Israel was sufficiently optimistic about the potential sanctity of man to be given to lavish descriptions of ideal man. A veritable treasure store of exalted personality types — the learned, the pious, the self-transcendent, the joyous, the Divinely guided, the prophetically illuminated, the self-sacrificing — crop up throughout his writings from 1843 to 1881. While human evil and Divine wrath do indeed permeate the Salanterian corpus, so do human achievement and Divine blessing.

But if we merely say that Rabbi Israel's thought is balanced, riveted toward both the real and the ideal, the evil and the holy, the Divine wrath and the Divine blessing, an ultimate question remains. What are Rabbi Israel's ultimate loyalties, particularly with regard to the third couplet, Divine wrath and Divine blessing, those modes of Divine interplay with man which occupy Rabbi Israel so acutely in his earliest and his latest periods? Merely to note that he stressed both ultimate felicity as well as ultimate penalty can lead us to believe that his thought, after all is said and done, is sheer moralism, a system of inducements to proper action, in which the inducements — Divine wrath and Divine blessing — actually banish the Divine element by deprecating it, by reducing it to the human plane, to business-like terms of earthly, and earthy, discourse. Here again, leafing through Rabbi Israel's writings, particularly his early theodicy and his Kovno Musar Letter, one is struck by the unabashed emphasis on post-mortal rewards and penalties, and on the essential continuity between the earthly soul who does good or evil and the heavenly soul who absorbs the fruits of its erstwhile, earthly good and evil. Yet, this, too, is but one side of the picture. In Rabbi Israel's earliest man-centered thought he describes the service of God for the sake of God as his ultimate ideal. Then, in his late German period, he integrates the two concepts of

service of God for the sake of reward and for the sake of God. Eternal felicity and penalty do indeed exist, writes Rabbi Israel; one ignores them at one's own peril. Being eternal, they ought to command one's attention. But, he continues, eternal felicity is attained only by selfless abandon for God, by service of God solely for the sake of God, with no eye toward the reward it entails. Ultimately, or at least in Rabbi Israel's earliest and his latest, if not in his middle, Kovno period, man is bidden to surrender to God alone — and surrender to God, of course, includes service of man.

III

Possessed of, perhaps obsessed by, an ethical Weltanschauung of scope and depth, Rabbi Israel's postures toward non-traditional ideas, and his wanderlust, acquire coherency. For, in his thought, he dedicated himself to unveiling the Divine presence within man and within his relations with his fellow — a program which, because it can never be wholly realized, requires constant reassessment. In entering the maelstrom of cultural-religious conflict, he preached a doctrine of inner wholeness and serenity side by side with social responsibility and religious struggle. If he took his own dialectical thought seriously, he must have been speaking autobiographically when he reportedly said:

When immersed, red-hot iron heats freezing-cold water, but at the same time, it itself becomes progressively colder.

And:

Man is like a harp — if he is whole and without blemish, he sings.¹⁵

This, then, was Rabbi Israel's coherency. For us, Jews living in the post-Holocaust era and at a time of return to things Jewish and to Judaism itself, the central task remains *action*; ethics; survival. At the same time, as the mid-twentieth century trauma which, though never to be forgotten, slowly recedes, we shall become more capable of and rightly interested in the justification of survival. To study as well as to act, to ponder timeless questions as well as to respond to timely necessities, to revivify the inner self as well as to rebuild the broken community, to unveil the Divine will as well as to search out the calling of history, in short, to seek contact with God as well as with man — these dialectical modalities of early modern Musar shall, I hope, become our own. As Rabbi Israel, again, reportedly said:

Spiritual matters are more important than material matters, but another man's material welfare is one's own spiritual concern.¹⁶

Immanuel 17 (Winter 1983/84)

15. Katz, *Tenu'at ha-Musar (op. cit.)*, I: 307, p. 301.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 304.